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ABSTRACT

This paper relates visual literacy to the historical development of art education in the United States, emphasizing the work of Walter Smith, an art educator, during the later nineteenth century. The visual mode of learning, especially drawing, in public schools has been justified as a means to furthering industrialization and as an end in itself, enhancing the observational powers and cultural values of individuals. Walter Smith's philosophy of art education was that drawing could and should be learned by any person and that it should be taught by artists. His work in Massachusetts schools from 1871 to 1882 focused on organizing a complete scheme of art education, from elementary school drawing to professional art-studio activities; and his plan to teach art education within the scope of art instruction promoted visual literacy as both means and end, an attitude this paper considers important for any modern discussion of visual literacy. (RL)

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The Historic Context for Visual Literacy: Walter Smith and others

The theory developed by Roger Sperry[1] in 1964 has gathered increased support, notably from Galin and Ornstein in 1973[2]. Many scholars and researchers are concerned with right and left cerebral hemispheric symmetry. In re-examining this urgent question for education we may note many appeals for appropriate strategies to redress the imbalance between analytic and synthetic academic affiliation. In this regard, the program here today includes contributions from those who believe that visual literacy may be a means, rather than an end. Others suggest that visual integration or visual sophistication, or even basic drawing skills may be appropriate modes. I would respectfully take issue with the contention that visual literacy, any more than any other kind, is either means or end. I believe that it can be both, depending on context. I do find some recent research indicating that creative or original thinkers (McKim)[3] can be bilaterally cognitive. Earlier, it was suggested that "interplay" between divergent and convergent thinking encouraged creativity. In sympathy with another presentor's idea of moving "back to a basic" and examining and re-examing an essential learned function of the brain, I wish to review the historic continuum.

Kenneth Boulding, writing in the magazine Change, has suggested that[4]

> "knowledge of institutional history is a problem that deserves much more careful study than it has received, as it may be an important element in the improvement of decisions..."

It appears that the belief that a visual mode of learning can develop acceptable levels of the appropriate skills--visual literacy in fact--is an idea that has never gained a level of acceptance either by educators or by the public supporters of the educational system. In examining the history of

visual education in the United States, we can find several partially successful attempts to obtain a parity of esteem. Since, prior to modern technology, most visual teaching and learning developed within the framework of the arts, it is to the history of Art education that the researcher must turn for evidence.

During colonial times, a reference to a Sir William Petty's advice on "particular parts of learning" favored children being "t ght to observe all sensible objects and actions..."[5] William Penn's 1682 Frame of Government included a committee of "manners, education and Art."[6] In an account from Philadelphia of 1696, Gabriel Thomas mentions "several good schools of learning" and includes "arts and sciences, as also reading and writing."[7] In 1710, there was printed in London, England, "Art's Masterpiece"[8] and it included, among elaborate technical instructions,

> "the Eye and the Hand are
> mainly required herein,
> the one to direct and
> the other to operate..."

and it laid stress on "well weighed and considered" constant observation for success in the "curious Art of drawing or Limning." In New England, the limners advertised their services as instructors, as well as the producers of portraits. The word limner derives from "Illuminer" (from "illumination"). Their fees ranged from one to forty dollars. Henrietta Johnson, who died in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1728, is recorded as the first woman painter in America. She made many portraits of this type. Another limner, Chester Harding, is said to have "amazed" Daniel Boone with a likeness.[9] In 1749, Benjamin Franklin published his "proposals Relating to the Education of Youth" and wrote that "Drawing is a kind of universal language."[10] He also quoted John Locke

> "when your son can write well and quick, I think it may be convenient not only to continue the Exercise of his Hand in writing, but also to improve the use of it further, in Drawing..."

George Washington paid James Cox $6.69 for "teaching G. W. Custis to draw, etc."[11] In 1812, the Russian secretary to the Consul General in Philadelphia, wrote his observations, mentioning the work of the Peales.[12] In 1818, Jefferson writing on "Public Education" made special mention of the "Fine Arts."[13]

In 1821, William Bentley Fowle used the Lancastrian monitorial system.[14] He saw an emphasis on drawing as an important aid to industrial training. William Minifie at the Baltimore Boys High School in 1848, produced a text based on geometric and mechanical principles.[15] Simultaneously Horace Mann was publishing in the Common School Journal of Massachusetts, the ideas he had gained from the methods of Peter Schmid of Prussia.[16] Cincinnatti was a city of many German immigrants, and a "Drawing department" of the public schools was established in 1847. Similarly, Cleveland enacted a programmatic requirement in 1849. The American Drawing Book is typical of the period.

This growing reliance on "drawing" as the principal vehicle for visual education continued throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. However, there were, in fact, two distinct philosophies. The first, and this was the main justification for public acceptance, was the industrial application. Indeed, the term "Industrial Art" came to be often used as a synonym for drawing. The second was a broader use of the medium in terms of the developing of observation and the cultural values inherent in the appreciation of Art. Pestalozzi had early recognized the values of activity for young children. A disciple, Josef Neef, working in Kentucky in 1808 had written that

> "my pupils, once masters of our explained geometrical drawing, will experience little difficulty in order to become adept at ordinary drawing...."

and an instructor at Columbia later advocated that[19]

> "a large part of every day will be spent in the open air... The ambition to draw well will lend individuals to ask for instruction in the Art...."

The Kindergarten movement also exerted a strong formative influence. Friedrich Froebel established the first one in Blankenburg, Germany in 1837. Another German, Carl Schurz and his wife, Margarethe, established the first Kindergarten in America at Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1856, with instruction entirely in German. Later, in Boston, Elizabeth Peabody began the work that was to spread its influence nationwide. Froebel saw his Kindergarten as a work of art and his planning and intense commitment to it inspired his disciples. Elizabeth Peabody described "Froebel's Kindergarten" as a "primary art school." To her, it exemplified "moral" and "spiritual" culture. Elizabeth stated "Art is the image of God's creativeness."

The Froebel "Gifts and Occupations" were expected to assist children to develop ability in selection of colors, textures, and by size and number to develop creative arrangements.[21] They were manipulative exercises which have generated many imitations, even including such influences within the Bauhaus "foundation course" of Johannes Itten, described by Kepes as "the Education of Vision."[22] However, for the most part, recent Kindergarten education has emphasized free expression, and at the lower age levels, little or no teaching is done other than help with materials usage. Creative expression based almost exclusively on free handling of Art forms may be a confining or limiting factor for some children, and it may well be

appropriate to consider reviving more precise media experiences, in the manner of Froebel and Peabody.

At the opposite pole of student experience was the professional draughtsmanship of the college or Academy student. In this, the work of Thomas Eakins at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts between 1876 and 1886, was the outstanding example of a teacher who revolutionized the methods of observation in what, prior to his arrival, had become a somewhat mediocre institution. Eakins' conviction as to the absolute need for thorough anatomical knowledge by student attendance at dissection lectures, together with his use of the nude model, brought him into conflict very rapidly with parental prudery. Even the separation into separate classes for men and women students could not stem the tide of protest. A letter to Academy President Claghorn dated April 26th, 1882 reads[23]

> "I appeal to you... as a Christian gentleman to consider the teaching [of a daughter]... for the culture of high Art, she entered a class where both male and female figures stood in their horrid nakedness..."

The writer, signed "R.S." alleged looseness of morals, licentiousness, coarseness in words and manner, and, finally, added that "the stifling heat of the room adds to the excitement, at 85° or even higher...." When Eakins was dismissed, his students paraded in protest, yet it is recorded that his real enemies were his faculty colleagues who criticized him to the Academy Directors.[24] It is probably true to say that dissection as an observational technique for visual education is not likely to be re-adopted, but neither is Eakins other technique of muscle delineation by electric shock!

It is of interest that Eakins, in spite of his over-riding commitment to professionalism, justified the extension of "pure art education" for

those planning a career in "industrial Art."[25]

The development of Art, or drawing, as a service to industry had come about as the United States became increasingly industrialized. By 1864 drawing was required in the Boston public schools, where the lowest grades used slates or drawing tablets; the middle level, drawing books; and the high schools appointed Art specialists, or drawing teachers. In this, Boston both followed and surpassed the programs of Cincinnatti and Cleveland of the 1840's, for by 1870 the Massachusetts State Legislature enacted into law a State requirement similar to that of its principal city. Maine and New York soon followed.

It is at this point that the decision to seek a leader for the new program in Massachusetts led to an invitation to Professor Walter Smith--an alumnus of the English South Kensington, London, School of Design, to visit Boston. The English Schools of Design were established in 1836, (the birth year of Walter Smith.) Sir Henry Cole reorganized them in the 1860's, and Charles B. Stetson, visiting from America, reported that old education was abandoned, based as it was "mainly on let-alone principles" and replaced it with a belief that instruction in Art, if applied for industry, could be rationalized and taught according to recognized principles. Such was the milieu in which Smith had lived and worked.

The crucial decision was that of the Boston Superintendent, John D. Philbrick, to appoint a standing Committee on Drawing. This committee decided that drawing should be taught, not by specialists, but by classroom teachers.

It was that decision that gave America its first opportunity to establish a fourth standard of literacy.

Walter Smith, founder of the Massachusetts Normal Art School, now the Massachusetts College of Art, was born in the village of Kemerton, in the county of Gloucestershire, England in 1836. The church records show that he was the son of a butcher, Thomas Smith, and his wife, Anne. He was the second son and the eleventh child. His parents were married in 1816, and his father died in 1852, at the age of 62. Anne outlived her husband, dying at 71 in 1867. Their graves in the churchyard are marked by a single stone with an elaborate cruciform fleur-de-lys which may have been designed by their son, Walter.

Walter Smith, as a product of his time, was trained in the most outstanding of the English schools, the South Kensington, London, Design School. These schools had been established in 1836 to create a corps of skilled draftsmen and designers for industry. In the great glass edifice of Paxton in the 1851 English Great Exhibition, English designs placed next to last place, with American last. The Great Exhibition was followed by the International Exhibition of 1862, and the Paris Exposition of 1867. The remedial action that began in England was echoed in America. In Massachusetts especially, the network of nine state teachers' colleges, together with the creation of the Agricultural College and the Institute of Technology, culminated in the decision by the powerful State Board of Education to pass a law making drawing a required subject in the public schools.

Walter Smith was, in 1870, an Art master at Leeds in England. The Boston, Massachusetts Standing Committee on Drawing advised Superintendent Philbrick to search for a qualified supervisor of drawing, and Smith was the recommended candidate.

Smith, at 35, was at the peak of his career in England. Nevertheless, in May of 1871 he came to negotiate with the Boston School Board. However, when he was offered but half of his English stipend, he returned home. A new solution was sought and effected when the State agreed to employ him also.[26] The final contractual arrangement was that he should become State Director of Art Education for Massachusetts (for two days per week), and Director of Drawing for the Boston Public Schools (for the remaining three). It was a big assignment.[27]

The work began in October of the same year, when he arrived from England with an authorized collection

> "made with the greatest liberality... thus for the trifling expenditure of $150.00 the State secured forty drawings and paintings,... forming an invaluable means of advancing art education...."[28]

Also a further $350 was expended and spent on copies, casts and models and all these items were to form a travelling exhibit. Smith added

> "I have to suggest that a place be provided in Boston where the collection can be safely kept and occasionally displayed.... When a Normal Art School has been established, the home of the collection will naturally be in it ....."[29]

This was the first mention of the great project which he was already planning and executing. And indeed he continued to press for a "remedy" for the "principal difficulty in the path of Art Education in this State, viz., that of providing competent teachers."[30] He also forcibly expressed his opinions to those from other states and advised that "Boston cannot teach you, ... and as yet the State of Massachusetts, though it requires that drawing shall be taught, has done nothing to provide the teachers...."[31]

To the Legislature, he stated that "we cannot do more than play with"... Art education until his recommended proposal for a State Normal School of Art should be established.

In 1873, it was done. A Federal Government Report records Smith as director, with an "able corps of instructors,"[32] including Professors Ware, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology; Bray, of Tufts College; Bartlett, London Design School; Mary Carter, from South Kensington and three other instructors. There were 47 male and 86 female students.

Frequently working six or seven days a week, and often twelve hours a day, Smith displayed an "awesome" energy and determination.[33] He had a powerful physique and tremendous enthusiasm. A remarkable teacher with great administrative ability, he had a ready wit and sense of humor. But he was also "dogmatic, arbitrary, and unyielding," qualities that harmed him later on. Smith described his activities as "devisory, advisory and supervisory"[34] and his long-range project has probably never been equalled. Acting on the expressed opinions of the Drawing Committee that the teaching should be done by regular teachers rather than specialists, Smith's plan encompassed all grade levels. He planned developmental, progressive stages from elementary drawing to professional Art studio activities, and included day and evening class student populations. This complete scheme was predicated on his belief that drawing was therefore something that could be learned by any person, and similarly, could be taught by a non-specialist. His sequence of instruction began with the development of muscular control and accuracy of delineation. He sought to make the "content" of his instruction a rational, easily understood, pedagogical tool for any teacher. He told his students

> "what we are trying to do in our lessons is to make the children know how to draw, not how to make drawings, and I hope you see the distinction."[35]

The students in the school quickly became successful in various competitive shows and exhibits, but the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition saw the greatest expression of praise for the program. French, Austrian and Canadian commissions to the Exposition praised it highly and the Philadelphia Commission on Awards gave the school's exhibit a National Diploma. During this time Smith's publication output was equally prodigious, beginning with Art Education: Scholastic and Industrial, in 1872, he followed with a Teachers Manual in 1873; The Drawing Book of Standard Reproductions and Designs and Industrial Drawing in the Public Schools in 1875; and Examples of Household Taste: The Industrial Art of the International Exhibition; A Preliminary Scheme of Primary Instruction in Drawing, all in 1880, and The American Textbooks on Art Education, I, II and III, in 1880, 1881 and 1883. At the same time he was writing vigorous expository letters to newspapers and journals and making a considerable number of teaching aids that in many ways were a fore-runner of programmed instruction.[36] Smith was also holding classes and institutes in various locations throughout the state of Massachusetts. Most significantly, he sought to inculcate a spirit of professionalism by the creation of the Massachusetts Art Teachers Association in 1874. Its objectives were described as "the general advancement of art education in America" and lectures and papers were published.[37]

But trouble was brewing. There was some teacher opposition, either because too much time from the school day was given to drawing, or because it entailed too much energy on the part of the teacher. Attendance at Smith's classes had always been voluntary, so many did not go. Those who

did complained of the stringent examination requirements. Public opposition developed which averred that drawing should not be in the curriculum at all, and some opinion thought it belonged only to the Fine Arts, to which the Drawing Committee weakly assented. Hostility developed from publishers who found Smith's works outselling their products. None of this was helped by Smith himself who claimed[38]

> "it has been somewhat difficult, through the absence of general information, to keep clearly before the public the true work ... in this school, the only one of its kind in America."

and, similarly

> "it was necessary to impress on large numbers who sought education in this school, the fact that none could be admitted who wished for instruction... merely for amusement, recreation, or professional art training, and that the State undertook only to educate teachers of industrial art."[39]

Smith declared that the public made a radical mistake when it assumed that a teacher of art need not be an artist. The State, he said, must make artists of all its students before it could ascertain

> "whether they have brains and caliber enough to become teachers of Art; for who can teach a subject he knows not, and how few can teach well even subjects they know. The State offers and gives here a four years' training in the practice of Art, and it will take no less time to discover who among the many students can aspire to become true teachers. But there will be many artists made here for every teacher worthy of the name; and the students and public should realize that the artists produced who are not teachers will be the failures, and the teachers who must of necessity be artists will be the successes."[40]

When Smith attempted, in 1880, to put into place the final link in his chain of planning, the opposition was total. The first group of students who had received nine years of sequential drawing education, were ready to enter the high schools, where the law required teaching by the regular faculty. MNAS students were thus the only teachers who would be fully qualified. An unholy combination of embittered High School teachers, angry taxpayers and competing publishers, notably the Prang Company, combined to press for his removal as Director. On the 26th April, 1881, Smith's position as Director of Drawing for the Boston schools, was terminated. He now became subject to renewed criticism of his principalship of the Normal Art School, from the Board of Visitors. These Boards were appointed by the Boston administration to "advise" a principal and his staff. The Leader of the M.N.A.S. Board was the Reverend Alonzo Ames Miner, a Universalist minister. Dr. Miner and Walter Smith had a long-standing difference of opinion. In the early years of the School, the original upper floor of its first home at Pemberton Square had become crowded. Miner suggested two upper floors of a building on School Street, and the school moved to that location over Smith's objections, in 1875. The entrance to the building was also used by other tenants for a house of prostitution. However, the building was owned by Dr. Miner's church, so the occupancy continued until 1879 when the lease expired. At that time Smith successfully moved the school to the Deacon House for half the rental, and with more than twice the accommodation. Miner tried in every way to stop the move, and at this point openly quarrelled with Smith. However, with 679 students in attendance from 1873 to 1876, with 218 for the 1877 year, and 265 for 1878, Smith prevailed.

The leader of the Board of Visitors, following Smith's 1881 dismissal as City Drawing Director, began again his harassment which, under later

questioning by an investigation committee, he admitted he "expected he should succeed." As the Committee reported,

> "... a line of policy, in some respects new, was adopted by the Board of Visitors... limiting the prerogatives of the principal..."[41]

This was, in fact, the summary dismissal of two of the staff and the re-assignment of others. Smith submitted his resignation which brought about the investigation. Prior to this, in June 1881, at the school's commencement, the students had expressed "entire confidence in Professor Smith" and asked that his work should be "made secure for all time."[42]

However, the Massachusetts Board met in 1882 and "unanimously" dismissed Smith from both his remaining posts as Principal of the School, and as State Art Director. The Annual Report for that year did not mention the vote, did not pay any respects to Smith, and the Board of Visitors' report merely noted "changes in the corps of instructors."[43] This was totally at variance with custom.

In 1883, Smith returned to England to become Director of the Art Department of the newly founded Bradford Technical College. He had come to America with "faith" in a vision that "brought me across the Atlantic at a time of life when men are disposed to settle down..."[44] But, as his daughter wrote "He has never been really well since he came back... the treatment he received [in America] seemed to break his spirit." He died on the 14th Steptember, 1886 and in that year the Art Department of the National Education Association sent a resolution of sympathy offered by George H. Bartlett, Smith's former colleague who referred to him as the man "to whom is due the honor of being a pioneer in American Art education." Seconding the motion was Dr. Miner. Miner went on to distinguished service as

President of Tufts College. He died in 1895.

Today Smith's ideas would be inappropriate, for in pedagogical terms both his "content and method" have been superseded. That he became the "forgotten man"[45] of Art education for many years does not, however, diminish his permanent place in the history.

Albert Munsell, colleague and teacher at the Massachusetts School, devised the color wheel system that was to become universal in school art programs of the early twentieth century. Reporting on the "interest in Art" in Massachusetts, he showed his awareness of Smith's political effects in stating

> "only when drawing entered the primary schools as an essential in the education of youth did the Art movement at last take on a solid and aggressive shape..."[46]

Munsell's pupil, Henry Turner Bailey, was described in a teaching notebook as "tested and not found wanting."[47] He went on to a distinguished career in American Art education, becoming a founder and later, President of the Eastern Art Teachers' Association. Walter Smith's successor, Otto Fuchs, resigned after only one year because the then Governor of Massachusetts, General Ben F. Butler, attempted to abolish all the Normal Schools. Butler was defeated, but Fuchs moved to the Maryland Institute of Art.

Most prestigious M.N.A.S. graduate of the class of 1883 was Anson Kent Cross, the "dean of American Art teachers," who taught at the school until 1921, publishing several books which indicate his philosophy that drawing could be universally taught. His National Drawing Course had as its aim to to give the student "power to do original and independent work." Other graduates were Walter Sargent, James Frederick Hopkins, Loyal Bailey Farnum and Theodore M. Dillaway. Hopkins and Farnum became the third and fourth

principals, respectively, of the Massachusetts School with Hopkins also re-assuming the State Directorship originally created for Smith. Farnum, through publication and leadership, affected nationally the growth of Art education through the second decade of the twentieth century. Dillaway became the Director of Art for the Philadelphia Public Schools, a post created by Superintendent Edwin C. Broome, who later developed a Division of Visual Education in the 1930's, where photography and film-making were an integral part of the activities.

Art teaching associations were formed in both East and West, and in 1907 the two associations met together in Cleveland. Later each merged with the Manual Training Associations, giving Art education both advantages and disadvantages. A superintendent from Michigan in 1900 stated

> "I most sincerely trust that the day is not far distant when the teacher's preparation for and ability to handle Art as taught in our public schools shall be subject to as severe tests and requirements as is any of the other branches..."[48]

and "unity of effort" was demanded, so that a College Art Association was formed at the 1910 meeting of the Association. In 1923 "close partnership" between industrial and fine Arts was cited as holding "high hopes for the future," and in 1928 the Association President declared

> "the public is being sold on the values of the Arts...surely we have our place in the sun; it is wholly our fault if we cannot hold it..."[49]

However, as Robert Saunders has pointed out recently, since the arts did not lead either to college entrance or to future employment, "art teachers taught in a limbo between them."[50]

During this century, the justifications for Art as a subject for instruction have continually shifted. Art was for beauty; for appreciation; for production; for cognitive development; for free expression; for progressive education and for creative and mental growth. Since the mid-century, it has allegedly promoted creativity, has been a behavioral objective, and a standard for competency. At this time Art education is beset with a dichotomy in terms of so-called Art "therapy" as opposed to "mainstreaming."

This is precisely why I do not now believe that the problem of visual illiteracy will be solved through Art education as it presently exists in the United States. When the school that Smith founded changed its name in 1926, it also diminished immeasurably the original principles. A statement of the time, reads

> "..the sole purpose of the introduction of drawing in the public schools was the establishment of art in industry. The teaching objective is still an important one, but the aim of Art in modern general education has changed...it was inevitable that some students would never be teachers..."

Less than one hundred years before, Horace Mann had stated that "drawing is a form of writing and should be taught with it." Walter Smith and his idea gave this element in education a firm foundation on which to build, a status that it had not previously possessed, and a precedent that even now, we cannot ignore.

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